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# Department of Consumer Protection

## FACT SHEET: Auto Repair Basics

Nearly 1,700 persons contact the Department of Consumer Protection each year with a complaint involving repairs to their automobile. The best way to avoid auto repair problems is to **be prepared**. Know how your vehicle works and how to identify common car problems. It's also important to know how to select a good technician, the kinds of questions to ask, and your consumer rights.

The more you know about your vehicle, the more likely you'll be able to head off costly repairs. You can detect many common vehicle problems by inspecting the area around your vehicle for leaks, listening for strange noises, being aware of a difference in the way your vehicle handles or even noticing unusual odors. Below are some tips for handling auto repairs, whether they be unexpected or planned in advance.

### If Your Car Breaks Down on the Road

- ◆ Get the car as far off the road as possible.
- ◆ Set out flares or reflective triangles to indicate that you have stopped.
- ◆ Stay with your car until help arrives. If you feel in any danger, stay inside the car with the doors locked until the police arrive.
- ◆ If your car must be towed, check the owner's manual for instructions. Some cars must be towed backwards; others require a flatbed tow.
- ◆ Local police usually have a list of available towing services if you get stranded. *Ask about costs before* you allow your car to be hooked up to the truck.
- ◆ Make every effort to remove your car from the service station it has been towed to as soon as you can, unless you plan to have your car repaired there. Otherwise, you will be charged daily storage fees.

- ◆ Remove all valuables from the car before you leave it.
- ◆ If you have questions about towing fees, contact the Connecticut Department of Motor Vehicles, Dealers and Repairers Division, at (860) 263-5056.

### Comparison Shop for Repairs

Consumers usually do a great job of comparing prices for appliances, furniture and food, but stop short when it comes to auto repair.

Too often, the first estimate is the one they accept. If your car still runs and you know what needs to be fixed, try to get at least three estimates. If you don't know what's wrong and a mechanic has to look the car over, you may have to pay a *diagnosis charge*. Of course, you may not want to get two more estimates and pay more diagnosis fees. But you may find that even three such charges add up to a small fraction of the cost you'd pay at an over-priced repair shop. Shop around if you can!

### Who's Doing the Work?

In Connecticut, only the *shop* has to be licensed, not the individual mechanics. You need to do some checking before you leave your car for repair. Ask whether the mechanic who will work on your car has a certificate from the National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence. Those who do will post their certificates at their service stations.

If you want even more assurance, ask the service station representative to write down the name of the mechanic on your estimate, along with a note stating that this mechanic holds such a certificate.

## Communicate!

Describe your car's symptoms to the mechanic. BUT — unless you're sure what the problem is, don't diagnose it yourself. You may end up paying for more than is needed.

## Diagnostic Fees

Repair shops must post a sign indicating if there is a fee for a diagnosis or an estimate. If the fee is more than \$50, a written consent must be obtained from you.

## Get an Estimate

*You have the right to a written estimate* before the repair work is done if the total cost of the repair will be more than \$50. You should definitely get an estimate so you can determine if you want the work done! A repair shop cannot work on your car without your authorization first. (If the repair cost is projected at less than \$50, you can still get a written estimate if you ask for one.) Be sure to ask how long the work will take.

## Plan on a Test Drive

Let the shop know in advance that you want to test drive the car once it's fixed and before you pay the bill.

## Work Authorization

If you can't wait for the estimate, you can ask the shop to prepare the estimate and call you for a verbal approval. **The repair shop cannot charge you for any work done without your authorization.**

And, if *additional* work is required beyond the original estimate, *your authorization must be obtained before they continue*. If the necessary work cannot be estimated, you may waive your right to a written estimate and give a general written authorization allowing the repair shop to make all "reasonable and necessary" repairs, but be sure to state the maximum amount of money you're willing to spend.

## Return of Parts

You are entitled to the return of any replaced parts, if you request them before or at the time the car is returned to you. If the parts have to be returned to the manufacturer, you are entitled to inspect them before they are sent.

Ask if any parts to be replaced will be new, used, or rebuilt. Any new part should come with a warranty; be sure to ask for it.

## The Invoice (Work Order)

Check the invoice carefully making sure you understand everything that was done and what you are paying for. Ask about anything you do not understand.

Be sure to get a legible copy of the work order. The charges for parts and labor must be itemized separately indicating the use of any new, rebuilt, reconditioned or used parts.

## Before You Pay the Bill

If you have made arrangements to do so, *test drive the car* before you pay your bill to determine whether the problem is solved.

## General Maintenance

Keep a copy of all work orders and receipts.

## If You Have a Complaint

If you have a complaint about **towing or repairs**, contact the State Department of Motor Vehicles, Division of Dealers and Repairers, 60 State Street, Wethersfield, Connecticut 06209, or visit their website at: <http://www.ct.gov/dmv>

If you have a complaint about **the advertising of towing or repair services**, contact the State Department of Consumer Protection, 165 Capitol Avenue, Hartford, Connecticut 06106. You may download a complaint form from our website at: <http://www.state.ct.us/dcp>